The Irish Famine: The Great Hunger, 1845

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The Great Hunger of the 1840’s was to be one of the most destructive periods in the entire history of Ireland. The years 1845 – 1850 saw Ireland brought to its knees with hunger and disease.

For around twenty years leading up to the years of the Famine there was a considerable surge in the population of the Emerald Isle. Towns such as Limerick, Tipperary and Roscommon witnessed population rises of up to thirty percent. This unprecedented increase in population meant that 1845 there was said to have been eight and a half million inhabitants in Ireland and it is recorded that up to one million of these people perished during the years of the Famine.

As the increase in population commenced, the Irish economy was able to keep pace with the surge in numbers; this was however short lived as the sheer scale of the shortage of food became clear. If confirmation was needed of the extent of a pending food shortage, then it came in November 1845 when a long awaited report by John Lindley and Lyon Playfair was released. The subject of this report which was commissioned by the Government was the state of the Irish potato crop. Even though the report warned of what lay ahead it came too late as the potato blight that was to prove so devastating was already underway.

An English newspaper on the 15th November 1845 described the unfolding events as follows: “Over half the Irish potato crop has failed this after it was struck by a potato blight. While a partial failure is not uncommon in Ireland, this looks to be extremely serious”.

The actual cause of the crop failure was “Pyhtophthora Infestans”. This was a fungal pathogen that could affect potatoes, tomatoes and in some cases melons. The blight attacks the potato in such a way that it removes its ability to provide protection against cold
or ice. The strain of the blight that infected the potato crop in Ireland had its origins in Mexico.

The malignancy of this blight very quickly justified the most pessimistic of forecasts. The situation became so desperate that even within months of the blight being discovered, starving families in Dublin attacked and raided what was left of a potato store in broad daylight.

The Government in London was slow to act. For too long, cries for help from Ireland went unheeded by those in Westminster. They failed to grasp the sheer magnitude of what was unfolding across the water in Ireland and indeed, many didn’t even care. This was a fact that was never to be lost on the Irish.

By 1846 families all over fear-filled Ireland were making plans for an exodus and this exodus was to prove epic in its nature. It is recorded that during the years 1845 – 1855 over sixty five thousand people a year left the shores of Ireland because of the Famine. In some of those years as many as three hundred thousand left for North America alone to escape the effects of the potato blight. This mass transatlantic exodus was recorded in an English newspaper under the headline:-

“EMIGRATION ON COFFIN SHIPS IS THE ONLY HOPE LEFT FOR THOUSANDS OF STARVING IRISH”.

North America was not the only destination however of those fleeing Ireland’s Famine. Apart from the major mainland cities of Glasgow and London, England’s “new cities” as they were called, of Manchester, Liverpool and Birmingham all saw their Irish population rise to unprecedented levels. It is important to both know and note that while the Famine of 1845 – 1850 was known as The Irish
Famine, the potato blight also greatly affected the Highlands of Scotland. The
working poor on the Highlands just like those in Ireland depended on the potato
for food. It was this powerful dependency on the potato that was at the very
heart of the problem.

One historian has made the point that in the 1840’s in Ireland, at least one third
of the population depended on the potato and indeed ate little else. They used it
in every meal, even baking bread
with it and of course we are famous
today for our “potato bread”. There
were various types of potato that
grew in Ireland in the 1840’s with
the main ones being “The Black, The
Apple, The Cup”, however the most
common of all was “The Lumper”.
This Lumper breed was brought over
from England and soon found favour with the Irish because of its high yield
qualities. It was said that up to six tonnes of Lumper potatoes could be harvested
from one acre of poor Irish land. While this was one reason why the potato was
so widely depended upon by the working poor, another reason was that the
potato unlike grain did not need milling. The potato was both easy to grow and
easy to prepare and was also a major source of two important vitamins such as A
and B. Reports suggested that because of the potato diet of the Irish, they were
actually healthier than many Europeans. They were also taller and before the
Famine occurred they lived longer too.

Food shortages and their related hardships were not uncommon in Ireland, but a
total failure of the main crop on which almost the entire population was relying
on was completely unprecedented. Nothing had prepared the people for this.

THE IRISH POOR LAWS

What further compounded the problem and suffering was the very Laws that
were established to combat it. From 31st July 1838 the treatment of the
disadvantaged in Ireland was governed by the Irish Poor Laws, as they were
referred to. The Act itself was called “Act for Relief of the Destitute in Ireland”. Far from relieving the destitute the outworking of the Act was a disaster. It proved to be totally counter-productive as it permitted the absentee landlords to take advantage of the situation at the expense of the hungry Irish. The relationship that existed between these absentee landlords and their Irish tenants was strained at the best of times. Often the landlords sub-divided their land into tiny plots on which a small shack or cottage would be erected. The tenant would pay for his rent by his labour on the estate of his landlord. Many of these estates grew potatoes which were sold as exports. In Ireland when the potato crop failed for four years in a row, the tenant farmers had absolutely nothing to pay their rent with and were subsequently evicted. Such evictions were taking place wholesale. On one estate in Roscommon there were over six hundred families who found themselves homeless.

In the late 1840’s the workhouse became very predominant in Irish society. Workhouses were introduced in Britain long before the Famine struck, however they had never been used on such an industrial scale. Speaking about the workhouses someone said that they were engineered so that only the very desperate would consider making use of them. They were arduous and filthy places and became pits of death in the years of the Famine. Those poor wretches who found themselves in them could have been forgiven for believing that they were in Hell. Families were torn apart and split up as we recall from the Nazi prison camps of WWII. Overcrowding was rife and many were turned away from their doors. Records show that in 1847, one hundred and fifteen thousand people in Ireland applied for refuge in workhouses. During that
year there were one hundred and thirty new workhouses built in the West of Ireland alone. Despite the fact the poor in Ireland were starving, there were still considerable quantities of grain being exported. This food quality grain was being sold abroad in order to pay the rents to the absentee landlords. At the time there were even reports of food being left piled up at the ports for so long that it actually began to decay. This practice which was not uncommon caused great resentment among the starving Irish population: neither was the issue lost on them when they were later to campaign for independence.

The Prime Minister at that time was Sir Robert Peel and he after striving to end the practice of selling the grain was forced into a position where he had to resign. However there was just enough will in Westminster to do what was right for the starving people in Ireland. Prior to his resignation, Peel had made arrangements for one hundred thousand pounds worth of American grain to be brought into Ireland. His initiative required a great deal of secrecy as he was fearful of the actions of his backbenchers. If they had uncovered his plan they would have called on the willing support of the Liberals to block it.

Following his resignation, Peel gave an interview to a newspaper stating: “Britain would abandon its aim to self-sufficiency in food. It is going to rely instead on buying food from others. We are building our industrial power at the expense of our agriculture and we will all suffer”. Irish appeals for Westminster to halt the export of home-grown food until after the Famine was over continued to go unheeded after Peel resigned.

As for the quality of the food intake of the Irish there was one report that stated: “Imported maize that was intended for cattle had poisoned dozens of people. Several deaths were reported in the Wexford workhouse that were linked to the toxic maize”.

Sir Robert Peel
What was remarkable about the Famine was that it was not indiscriminate. Neither the clergy nor the civil-service was affected by the overwhelming shortage of food; they ate while others starved. Those affected by the hunger in Ireland were the working poor. Some clergy later became affected by the disease that ensued and they died as a result. As for the views of the clergy at the time they varied widely from passive acceptance of the Famine to the absolutely outrageous.

One report mentions a sermon by Rev. Thomas Hanley who was visiting Mullabrack, Armagh in 1847 preached a particularly vitriolic sermon stating that Jehovah had “manifested His anger” by “laying bare His arm”. Hanley’s outrageous explanation of the Famine would have angered many of the Armagh congregation by ascribing their misfortune to such factors as “inactivity, infidelity, filthy conversation, Sabbath breaking, drunkenness, robbery and murder”. It was not uncommon for parishioners to be labeled as “whores and whomongers” and being told that God was angry with them because of their sin and was therefore starving them all. This of course was totally outrageous as apart from anything else, there were more whores in England than in Ireland and they were not being starved to death in their thousands.

If the 1845-1850 Famine in Ireland was the judgment of God, then the reason for it is known only to God whose ways are perfect and past finding out and we bow to His sovereignty.

Sermons like that of Rev. Thomas Hanley were extremely unhelpful to the unfortunate victims of the Famine and the fevers that accompanied it.

Records reveal that in 1847 towns in Ulster such as Newry, Enniskillen, Downpatrick and Belfast all saw thousands perish from starvation. There were fifty to sixty deaths reported weekly from the Belfast workhouse alone. Old graveyards were opened right across Belfast and a new City Cemetery in West Belfast was required to meet the pace at which bodies were accumulating; many were buried in mass graves without any ceremony. Disease was widespread and
the decomposing corpses were hastily thrown into pits containing hundreds of bodies. Apart from the hunger there was a fever in almost every home, especially in the homes of the working poor. In the winter of 1847, tens of thousands died from Typhus. The main charity at that time that were active in bringing relief to the poor was the Quakers or the Society of Friends as they were also known and it was due to their lobbying that Parliament introduced the Soup Kitchen Act. This allowed the Quakers to open Soup Depots in major towns all over Ireland. Soup Depots were large and designed to supply Soup Kitchens on a day to day basis. This brought a degree of order to the massive relief effort which unfortunately had been lacking up to this point.

The resentment that the Famine caused boiled over in November 1847 when Anglo-Irish landlord Major Denis Mahon was assassinated as he drove his carriage through his property in County Roscommon. Mahon had already removed three thousand of his twelve thousand starving tenants by offering some passage to America aboard disease-ridden “coffin ships”, giving some a pound or two to leave peaceably and sending the police to evict some six hundred families. What set this killing apart from others at the time was that just days before Major Mahon was shot he was named from the pulpit by a local Papish priest who marked him as the cause of Ireland’s misery. This controversy only grew when the Bishop was so quick to jump to the defence of this priest. There were those to within the Papacy who spread the fanciful notion that the Protestants were to blame for Ireland’s hunger.

This statement was to be echoed from Papish pulpits all over Ireland. The Papacy had found a way to attack the British Empire from within the Empire through the...
Irish. There was even a failed rising in 1848 led by William Smyth O’Brien, an Irish M.P.

In 1849 the potato crop failed again in Ireland and the Famine ravaged on for another twelve long months. The same year there was also a massive outbreak of cholera which took the lives of thousands more of the population. During this time the death toll was also rising in the Highlands of Scotland as there too the potato crop failed and disease was rampant. By early July 1849 it was reported that some seven hundred and eighty four thousand people in Ireland were in receipt of relief. Most of this relief was distributed by unions, but let no one forget it, for decades after the Famine their leaders stirred up Irish crowds by reminding them of how Ireland needed the unions in her time of crisis.

By the end of 1849 the worst of the Famine had passed. At this stage over nine hundred thousand people were believed to have died and as many again had emigrated; those who remained were sickly and malnourished.

The Great Irish Famine of 1845 to 1850 was Ireland’s holocaust; it was as if the Irish nation had died. The very soul of Ireland had been mortally wounded and the rate of emigration from Ireland continued for years after the Famine had officially ended in 1850. There was no actual event that marked the end of the Famine, but by then the crops of potatoes were being harvested blight and disease free and were fit to eat. Even though the blight had gone the exodus continued unabated. The average number of Irish people leaving for North America was in the region of sixty five thousand a year between 1845 to 1855 and in fact some of those years saw as many as three hundred thousand leave this Island. Many also headed for the British mainland to cities like Glasgow, Liverpool and London.

Nationalists discerned that the Famine had created opportunities. These opportunities were to become fatal to the British Empire as cries for Home Rule for Ireland soon morphed into cries for total independence. Irish Republicanism was born before potato blight brought about the Famine, but it grew up and flourished in the years that followed. In 1858 the Irish Republican Brotherhood emerged and grew in popularity among Irish Nationalists until in 1916 they were to become the Irish Republican Army (I.R.A.)
The Irish who left for America for generations after the Famine were to fund and arm the I.R.A. in Ulster to kill Protestants and soldiers of the British army who were in Ulster to protect the population from sectarian I.R.A. murderous attacks.

Let me close this chapter on Ireland’s Great Hunger with the words of an old historian: “The Great Famine of 1845 dealt Ireland such a profound blow that it altered the entire course of her history.”